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*THE NUCLEAR POWER RENAISSANCE IN THE UK: DEMOCRATIC DEFICIENCIES WITHIN THE ‘CONSENSUS’ ON SUSTAINABILITY**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on New Labour's policy towards the nuclear renaissance. It places this policy in the context of wider discussions on the democratic implications of the new constellations of governance emerging from the drive towards more sustainable futures. The paper identifies two crucial developments within the nuclear renaissance: firstly, the controversy surrounding the consultative process in 2006 and 2007; and secondly, the creation of new 'efficient' and 'streamlined' planning procedures through the establishment of the Planning Act 2008 and The Infrastructure and Planning Commission (IPC). The article builds on work which seeks to bring together questions of 'democracy' and 'the political' within discussions on 'sustainability'. It argues that an understanding of these moments can only be properly established through an analysis of the wider discursive frame of 'sustainability' in which nuclear has been reinvented, and the way it has been utilized as a strategic tool of governing. The apparent 'consensus' on sustainability appears to foreclose discussions on multiple and divergent political imaginaries into a single shared vision. This is symptomatic of the wider conditions of the post-political and the post-democratic, where debate is reduced to managerial and technocratic particularities in which, regardless

of public engagement, nuclear power becomes an 'inevitability'.

Key Words: Consultation, democracy, planning, nuclear renaissance, sustainability

El renacimiento de la energía nuclear en el Reino Unido: deficiencias democráticas dentro del “consenso” sobre la sustentabilidad

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en la política del Nuevo Laborismo en torno al renacimiento nuclear. Se ubica a esta política en el contexto de discusiones más amplias acerca de las implicaciones democráticas de nuevas constelaciones de gobernanza que emergen de la tendencia hacia futuros más sustentables. El artículo identifica dos desarrollos clave dentro del renacimiento nuclear: en primer lugar, la controversia en torno al proceso de consulta de 2006 y 2007, y en segundo lugar, la creación de nuevos procedimientos de planeamiento “eficientes” y “racionales” a través del establecimiento de la Ley de Planeamiento de 2008 y de la Comisión de Infraestructura y Planeamiento (IPC en inglés). El artículo se basa en trabajos que apuntan a incorporar cuestiones sobre “democracia” y sobre “lo político” en las discusiones sobre “sustentabilidad”. Se argumenta que sólo se puede arribar

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a un entendimiento adecuado de estas cuestiones si se analiza el marco general de las discusiones sobre “sustentabilidad” dentro del cual lo nuclear se ha reinventado, así como también la manera en que el mismo se ha utilizado como herramienta de gobierno. El aparente “consenso” sobre la sustentabilidad parece limitar las discusiones que se dan entre múltiples y divergentes imaginarios políticos dentro de una visión singular y consensuada. Ello es un síntoma de las condiciones más generales de lo “post-político” y lo “post-democrático”, donde el debate es reducido a las particularidades gerenciales y tecnocráticas dentro de las cuales el poder nuclear se convierte en “inevitable”, sin considerar la participación pública.

Palabras clave: consulta pública, democracia, planeamiento, renacimiento nuclear, sustentabilidad

Introduction

“...Consent is not to be understood as the sociologist’s ‘spontaneous consensus’...but rather as something that is organized through specific institutions and always (and necessarily) backed up by the potential application of force”. (Burawoy, 2003: 215)

“We can expect simmering frustration, resentment, widespread feelings of disempowerment and in consequence possibly more direct action and divorcement from the political process”. Journalist John Vidal, commenting on the democratic implications of the 2008 Planning Act (2009a).

Research into the governance of nuclear power development in the UK is timely. In late 2009, Ed Miliband (Labour Party Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change) announced plans for 10 nuclear power stations to be built in a decade -- the most ambitious proposed nuclear development in Europe (Vaughan, 2009). This ambitious project is justified as a response to climatic change, and the need to ‘keep the lights on’ through the utilization of low carbon energy sources. Yet there is widespread public distrust of nuclear power. No nuclear power station has been ordered in Britain since the construction of Sizewell B

in 1985. The nuclear option had largely been ruled out as too costly and troublesome, due to issues associated with nuclear waste production, and other social and economic burdens of its legacy.

In 2003 the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said that nuclear power could be a suitable low carbon technology. However, due to the economic inefficiencies and waste legacy surrounding the nuclear industry, new power stations would not be built, although “we will keep the option open” (DTI, 2003: 48). By 2008 this option was, indeed, opened, twinned with the intention to reduce man-made carbon emissions by 60% by 2050. The Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) declared that “we have decided...to build and operate new nuclear power stations” (BERR, 2008a: 4).

So the decision was made. However the consultative and planning phases of nuclear policy were controversial. The government, committed to “the fullest consultation”, was forced to repeat earlier (2006) consultations, which had occurred after Greenpeace launched a successful legal challenge. Widespread discontent emerged during this second series of consultations. The process was labelled as merely a ‘rubber stamping’ exercise to legitimize a decision already taken. Moderate NGOs, such as The Green Alliance and WWF, as well as members of the public, abandoned the proceedings, calling them a ‘sham’ (Vidal, 2009b; Macalister, 2009).

The new planning strategies outlined in the Planning Act of 2008, designed to oversee the development of proposed nuclear power, have been criticized for being undemocratic: “a long drawn out battle with the planning system” has been anticipated by the media (Hetherington, 2009). Elsewhere, the ‘Nuclear Renaissance’ has begun to receive critical attention. Significant attention has been directed at the many controversial aspects of new nuclear development. These include (but are not limited to) the implications of nuclear for the development of a decentralized energy system (Mitchell and Woodman, 2006), the

economics of nuclear power (see Thomas et al, 2007), and issues surrounding nuclear and the discourse of trust (see Wulforst, 2007). Discussions of the many risks and dangers can be found, for example, in *Nuclear or not?* (Elliot 2007), which provides an excellent overview of the issues. Hence, these arguments will not be rehearsed here.

Instead, this article interrogates the democratic and political implications of nuclear power's renaissance. The 'nuclear renaissance' is the term utilized within government, industry, and the media, to refer to the revival that nuclear technology is apparently experiencing, within the context of new concerns about energy security and climate change. The article reviews the discursive framing of nuclear power as 'sustainable', and then explores this rhetorical framing as a tool of governing, both within the consultation process, and in the justification of the controversial planning guidelines. Both elements are brought together in a discussion of the nuclear renaissance within the wider context of the discourse of sustainable development. It is proposed that this rhetoric is symptomatic of the post-political and the post-democratic, where debate and discussion is replaced by a managerial and technocratic style of governing. Within such conditions, nuclear power exists as *the* technology, enabling the continuation of current socio-economic excesses in an apparently 'sustainable' manner.

The nuclear renaissance: 'reluctant acceptance' of nuclear power as a 'sustainable' technology

The nuclear industry must be seen in a wider set of relations referred to as 'the nuclear doctrine'. This is defined as "a set of political, social and cultural conditions combining several factors, each of the factors in some way reveals a part to the story that has become our historical legacy and context, as well as actions of today and tomorrow related to nuclear power" (Wulforst, 2007: 2). A new era of optimism towards nuclear technology has emerged through its reinvention as 'sustainable'. Nuclear technology has been framed in a new light, where the notion of 'framing' connotes "the perceptual lenses, worldviews or underlying assumptions that guide communal

interpretations and definitions of particular issues" (Miller, 2000: 212).

Recently, as Bickerstaff et al (2008: 147) observe, "...the expansion of the new nuclear power sector is increasingly being constructed by individual actors, scientists, a range of senior politicians and advisors to government within a prognostic policy frame – in other words it is being reframed as a solution to the problem of climate change". What must also be added is that powerful lobbying by the nuclear power industry has been vital in establishing nuclear's new 'sustainable' status. The nuclear industry journal *Nucleonics* stated in 1998 that "nuclear needs climate change, more than climate change needs nuclear" (Quoted in Elliot, 2007: 4). Importantly, the discursive creation of 'sustainable nuclear power' has focused on it being zero carbon at the point of production, whilst identifying the notable issue of waste as a separate element of consideration. This has been noted by members of the Committee on Radioactive Waste management (CoRWM) (see Lowry, 2007).

Nuclear was previously one of the great enemies of the environmental movement. However it has begun to evolve as a 'solution' due to its low carbon status. It has continued to gain ground amidst mounting evidence of global warming produced from the IPCC and the need to mitigate against 2°C warming. James Lovelock, author of the Gaia hypothesis, supports the pro-nuclear cause, arguing that "we have no time to experiment with visionary energy sources: civilization is in imminent danger and has to use nuclear – the one safe, available energy source – now, or suffer the pain soon to be inflicted on our outraged planet" (2005).

This changing attitude can be seen in the writings of environmentalist George Monbiot, who had once declared that nuclear was "the world's most dangerous business" and that "...it is time to shut nuclear power down, and begin the dangerous and expensive task of decommissioning one of Britain's biggest disasters" (2000). By August 2008 however, his view had radically shifted: "I have now reached the point at which I no longer care whether or not the answer is nuclear. Let it happen" adding that "...we can no longer afford

any rigid principle but one: that the harm done to people living now and in the future must be minimized by the most effective means, whatever they might be" (Monbiot, 2008).

Lovelock's alarmist call, that 'civilization is in imminent danger', resembles the apocalyptic imagery in which the climate change issue is often situated. As Swyngedouw argues, the rhetoric surrounding climate change increasingly "...invokes the spectre of annihilating apocalyptic futures if no direct and immediate action is taken" (2007: 33). Within such framing we see a grudging acceptance of nuclear, where its ethical concerns and dangers are dwarfed, because "climate change is by far the biggest issue". The reduction of carbon becomes what Monbiot refers to as 'the one rigid principle' within which all other concerns must be considered. This does not equate to a full endorsement of nuclear power. Rather it connotes that the various substantial concerns of the dangers of the nuclear industry, can only be understood within a wider context of the 'threat to civilization' posed by climate change. Here we see the linguistic construction of a 'trade-off' scenario, where, as undesirable as nuclear may be, it must be grudgingly accepted with regards to climatic change.

Traditionally public perceptions have highlighted widespread concern over new nuclear construction and a deep distrust of the industry itself. However, these views appear to be shifting (see Grove-White et al, 2006 and Pidgeon et al 2008). The change in public opinion however, cannot be understood apart from the new and increasingly prevalent rhetoric of nuclear power as a sustainable technology. Bickerstaff et al illustrate the apparent 'reluctant acceptance' of new nuclear development and a shift in public opinion associated with a "...new framing of nuclear energy as 'sustainable energy'" (2008: 146). The discourse of 'reluctant acceptance' defined as "...a resignation verging on frustration that there is no avoiding some continued dependence on the nuclear sector" (ibid: 159), has become an increasingly common response to the 'spectre' of climate change; where "beginning from individual and group positions on nuclear power

that, as we have documented, were resolutely negative, there were observable shifts towards more mixed and open views about this issue when participants considered climate change" (ibid: 159).

The term 'sustainability', through which nuclear has recently been reframed within government policy, is therefore significant in the comprehension of the new-found enthusiasm for the nuclear option. It has become the 'buzzword' of our current era; a signifier which can seemingly be attached to everything and everyone, regardless of political persuasion. Such apparent agreement renders 'sustainability' an a-political domain, where discussions surrounding the term are usually confined to the realm of scientific expertise and other forms of expert administration. As Žižek argues however "...every neutralization of some partial content as 'non-political' is a political gesture par excellence" (1999: 227).

The definition of sustainability presented in the policy documents of the UK government, is both vague in its detail, and all encompassing in terms of the diversity of issues it invokes. However, certain features within the sustainable discourse remain uncontested, and their naturalization assumed. This vision is based upon technological innovation and the laws of the market as solutions to environmental 'externalities', rather than fundamental changes in consumptive practices being needed, or questioning the underlying productive process of current societal organization. Tony Blair made this perfectly clear at Davos in 2005, when he stated that "if we were to put forward as a solution to climate change something which would involve cuts in economic growth or standards of living, it would not matter how justified it was, it simply would not be agreed to" (BBC News, 2005). In the language of 'Ecological Modernization', nuclear power represents a 'win-win' scenario where 'business as usual' can continue, powered by an apparently 'carbon neutral' technology. "The return of nuclear", argue Bludhorn and Welsh (2007: 192) "...illustrates the firm resolve to defend and continue rather than reverse or change the established path".

The presentation of the sustainable vision is one where consensus has been reached on the appropriate course of action to take. Indeed, the consensual form of politics which sustainable development arguably entails has become the main political arrangement of late capitalist democracies (Badiou, 2005; Rancière, 1995). Such a condition in which there appears to be a consensual vision of sustainability, has significant implications for the features of decision making and deliberation which can occur.

A significant body of work on environmental politics has emerged around the idea of such a consensual political arrangement where shared 'win-win' outcomes have become the order of the day (Durant et al, 2004). However, others have become wary of such a frame, arguing that "...the existence of consensus can be a sign of personal or structural power which is exercised to keep various voices and conflicts out of the realm of public discussion" (O'Neill, 2007: 183). The consensual form of politics has been identified as one that "...mobilizes a view of politics which has evacuated the dimension of antagonism and, postulates the existence of a 'general interest of the people' whose implementation overcomes the winners/losers form of resolution of conflicts" (Mouffe, 2000: 14).

A consensual arrangement is never 'spontaneous' and 'natural' but rather must be forged and maintained, drawing critical attention to the "dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, [and] functionings" (Foucault, 1977: 26) enacted within governing institutions to preserve the consensual vision on sustainability. Particular attention must therefore be given to how the rhetorical framing of nuclear power as a sustainable technology, exists as a strategic tool of governing, in influencing opinion and forging the terms of debate.

The consultation period

"Before any decision to proceed with the building of new nuclear power stations, there will need to be the fullest public consultation" (DTI, 2003)

"The presentation of a decision as a discrete event can itself be an institutional artefact, a retrospective formal ratification of decisions already taken" (O'Neill et al, 2008: 207)

In the *Energy Review* (2003) the British government committed itself to carrying out "the fullest consultation" on the nuclear issue. The need for such a consultation was noted by prominent voices such as the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC, 2006). However in the initial energy consultation of 2006, controversy surrounded the framing of question 3, which focussed on nuclear directly. It asked, "The Energy White paper left open the option of nuclear new build – Are there particular considerations that should apply to nuclear as the government re-examines the issues bearing on new build, including long-term liabilities and waste management?" (DTI, 2006a: 11).

The rhetorical framing of this significant question cast doubt as to the extent that the process was in fact 'open ended'. This relates to the differentiation between *substantial* questions, related to the principle of the idea, which would take on the question of nuclear directly in relation to alternative strategies, in comparison to *issues-related* questions, which in this case would examine the necessary particularities of governmental consideration of nuclear power. The framing of the question, clearly takes the form of the latter, focussing on the details and particularities of new nuclear development, rather than confronting the underlying question of the nuclear option in the first place (Royal Courts of Justice, 2007: 45). A truly 'open ended' questioning, living up to 'the fullest public consultation', as proposed by the Sustainable Development Commission, would look at and address *substantive* concerns, rather than bypassing this stage to focus on the particularities of nuclear.

Despite this, it was announced that "the government believes that nuclear has a role to play in future UK generating mix" (DTI, 2006b: 114). However, the consultation period and the rapidity of decision-making received a notable critique from *The Environmental Audit Committee* (2006), arguing that the consultation period had largely been designed to

facilitate a decision already taken by the government. Greenpeace launched, and won, a legal case where it was declared that the consultation process had in fact been “seriously flawed”, “wholly inadequate” and “unlawful” (Royal Courts of Justice, 2007: 45). Furthermore, the haste with which a decision was made suggests that the views of those consulted (which were largely negative, see DTI, 2006c), appeared to be of little importance.

A day after Greenpeace’s victory, despite Tony Blair boldly announcing that “this won’t affect policy at all” (BBC News, 2007) the government were obliged to provide further consultation. The second phase began with the release of the consultation document *The Future of Nuclear Power: the role of nuclear power in a low carbon economy* (DTI, 2007a), published alongside an Energy White Paper *Meeting the Energy Challenge* (DTI, 2007b). Of particular significance in these consultation documents, was the increased level of rhetorical entwining of the question of nuclear, where it was related specifically to the wider frame of climate strategy and sustainability.

Question 16 posed the main point of controversy, asking: “In the context of tackling climate change and ensuring energy security, do you agree or disagree that it would be in the public-interest to give energy companies the option of investing in new nuclear stations?” (DTI, 2007a: 29). The wording here is crucial, and encapsulates the notion that the ‘public good’ of nuclear power, and all associated concerns about the potential ‘risks’ and ‘unknowns’, can be apprehended and addressed only within wider concerns and discussion of climate change.

Such an increase in the rhetorical framing of nuclear can also be seen in the discrepancies between the aims identified on the consultation website and within the main documents, and the ways in which the questions were actually framed in the latter parts of the consultation document and the *stakeholder materials* distributed at events. The website stated that “the discussion at events will address the same key questions in the consultation document” (UK Gov quoted in Greenpeace, 2007). At the beginning of

the consultation document it was stated that the aims were to “provide the government with information which will help it to take the decision whether or not to allow energy companies to build new nuclear power stations in the country” (DTI, 2007a: 3), and “to ask whether it is in the public interest to allow energy companies to invest in new nuclear power stations” (ibid: 3). There exists a clear difference between the questions encapsulated in these aims, and the framing of the question 16 cited above.

As Dorfman notes “Even in the most technical and sophisticated forms of analysis it seems that the answer you get depends on the way you frame the question” (2008: 6). Of particular note, is the way in which the ethical issues of nuclear power, particularly that of waste disposal, were twinned with ethical issues of intergenerational concern in relation to the dangers of climatic change. The official line taken by the government is clear: “we believe that the intergenerational issues of radioactive waste should not be considered in isolation, but alongside the long-term impact of climate change” (DTI, 2007a: 144).

The rhetorical impact of such a statement should not be underestimated. Despite evidence of other potential energy paths, the rhetorical device portrays that a trade off will have to be made, in terms of the public suffering the potential dangers and uncertainties of a nuclear waste legacy in order to protect ‘civilization’ from the devastating effects of climate change. As Blowers argues “by suggesting that nuclear new build should be discussed in terms of the need to address climate change the government is framing the discussions in a particular way. That is, one that is likely to privilege the case for nuclear energy” (2008: 32). Greenpeace launched a complaint to the Marketing Research Standards Board, who concluded that ““information was inaccurately or misleadingly presented, or was imbalanced, which gave rise to a material risk of respondents being led towards a particular answer” (Greenpeace, 2008). It appears that in response to negative public opinion in the first consultation, the process was simply repeated with an increased rhetorical entwining of nuclear with

climate change in an attempt to influence an outcome of 'reluctant acceptance' towards the nuclear option.

Planning for a sustainable (and nuclear) future

Significant developments in the planning system deemed necessary for facilitating the building of new nuclear power, have also been discursively framed through recourse to 'sustainability'. Since 2006, the government stressed that, in order to implement large infrastructure developments for a more sustainable future, reforms in the planning system were necessary for the provision of a more secure and certain environment for investment (DTI, 2006d). Since then, significant changes had been mobilised with the release of *The Planning Act 2008* where large scale infrastructure projects will be overseen from the perspective of 'national need'.

The past decade has been dominated by the proposed notions of 'horizontal' governance and a 'de-centred' state apparatus, where there is no longer a mono-centric state, but rather the state exists as 'many centres' within self organizing, inter-organizational networks (Rhodes, 1996; Rhodes 1997; Durant et al, 2004). Previously, the government professed a desire for 'decentralized' forms of decision making; where "as different parts of the UK, our ability to set our own priorities and find our own answers is an important part of achieving sustainability" (DEFRA, 2005). However, what is emerging within the development of *The Planning Act* appears to be a practical and rhetorical diminishment of such principles in favour of more overtly authoritarian forms of decision making.

Proposed new nuclear development has undoubtedly been a major influence on the new developments in planning. In 2005, before the desire for new nuclear build had been explicitly stated by the UK Government, Keith Parker, who at the time headed the Nuclear Industry Association, said that a new nuclear build would require "creating the environment in which the private sector investors would feel comfortable" (Quoted in Meek, 2005). This feeling of 'comfort' is predicated on a series of demands, including: "the government to change the rules so

that planning permission for nuclear power stations can be granted more quickly"; "government money for inspectors to certify new reactor designs in Britain"; "the government to guarantee a minimum price for nuclear electricity to prevent it being rendered unprofitable if other ways of generating power turned out to be cheaper"; and "the need to be able to build a large number of reactors (identical) 10 in theory, to lower costs through economies of scale" (ibid). Above all, this identifies the need for a strategic alliance between government and industry, to safeguard the development of new nuclear build from interventions of both public protest and the (normally privileged) 'laws of the market'.

Plans for such a 'streamlined' system desired by the nuclear industry were outlined in the government document *Planning for a Sustainable Future* (2007). The document states that a more efficient and sustainable planning system is predicated on three factors; national policy statements for major infrastructure development, a presumption 'in favour' of development for major infrastructure proposals so long as they are consistent with national policy statements, and an independent commission to manage inquiries and determine individual applications (HM Gov, 2007: 20). The discursive transition is notably a much more state oriented one, with the 'scaling up' of a sustainable energy strategy to the national level.

In the white paper, *Meeting the Energy Challenge*, the connections between nuclear power, and the new national planning laws were explicitly stated. The paper outlines that "the government will carry out a package of facilitative actions designed to reduce the regulatory and planning risk associated with investing in nuclear power stations" (BERR, 2008b: 129). Consultation will be undertaken through Strategic Siting Assessments (SSAs), where consent for the development would have already been granted at the national level. Time limits placed by government ensure an efficient procedure for the development of nuclear, with the anticipation that development of new nuclear power could begin within a year after application.

The Planning Act (HMGov, 2008) put these changes into law. Again the language of 'sustainability' would be crucial in justifying these alterations. Due to the perceived 'urgency' in combating climate change, National Policy Statements (NPS's), and potential negative features of the act, (such as the changing nature of consultation) are justified as being vital in achieving sustainable development. National Policy Statements are thought necessary to limit discussion and to facilitate timely action, because "consideration of individual applications can take months or years including lengthy debate about the national need for infrastructure. The process of reaching decisions is complicated" (Department for Communities and Local Government. 2009: 4).

The Infrastructure and Planning Commission (IPC), which was a point of particular controversy within the planning act, represented an authoritarian turn in the Labour government's sustainable development policy. Under the IPC, questions were to be based largely on written responses, or were to be led by commissioners as a question and answer session, avoiding 'adversarial' debate. The commissioners leading the IPC, were made up of 35 experts drawn from "planning, law, engineering, national and local government, environment, economy and business", to decide on major projects, construct national strategies and act as intermediaries between industry and the public. The IPC outline report stated that "commissioners will act as decision makers on applications for nationally significant infrastructure projects" (Department for Communities and Local Government. 2009: 5)

Within discussions on nuclear and the planning procedures surrounding its development, the hegemonic encapsulation of sustainability acts as the governing force of governance itself. With the case of neoliberalism for example, there is a seemingly paradoxical link between a market driven, 'state-free', business oriented ideological framework, and the development of an often more autocratic role of the state, where "...neo-liberalism might be characterized as the dominant contemporary rationality of government" (Dean, 1999: 150). That is, the very

ideology which posits itself as being 'anti state', creates a more unaccountable state formation. Here, policy is largely determined by a collaboration of expert administration between government and business interests. 'Sustainability' (which ultimately includes the assumptions of neoliberalism), functions similarly, where it operates as a 'dominant rationality' guiding government policy. This limits and forecloses discussion whilst simultaneously creating and justifying more autocratic forms of governance, where decisions are formed through a union of unaccountable elites and expert administration.

The nuclear renaissance as 'post-political' and 'post democratic'

The origins of both the inevitability of nuclear as a 'solution' to climate change, and the controversies surrounding the governance of the issue, are to be found in an analysis of the discursive frame of 'sustainable development' as symptomatic of the conditions of the 'post-political' and the 'post-democratic'. Although the environmental question surrounding the need for sustainable development has increasingly become a central object of 'politics', Swyngedouw (2007) identifies the 'politics' surrounding the environment (in particular the case of climate change) as being fundamentally that of the 'post-political'.

Such a 'post-political' condition has been identified by Žižek (1999), Rancière (2004), and Mouffe (2000) (among others), as that where disagreement and the antagonistic element central to the properly political, is replaced by a consensual, managerial form of governing, where discussion is limited to a series of single issues and challenges common to all. The post-political functions firmly within the realms of what is considered possible within our current political assemblages. The properly political gesture however, alters the very coordinates of what is considered possible. The political functions through the possibility of the impossible; of political imaginaries reaching beyond current societal configurations. As Alain Badiou writes "the essence of politics is not the plurality of opinions. It is the prescription of a possibility in rupture with what exists" (2005: 24).

Vital in understanding the post-political is consideration of the discursive frames in which hegemonic constructs which eradicate proper debate become solidified. The establishment of the post-political situation relies on a disguised political act, in which the 'solutions' to the challenges experienced are assumed through a hegemonic grip on those signifiers rendered as being a-political. According to Rancière, the properly political "...is not a quarrel over which solution to apply to a situation but a dispute over the situation itself, a dispute over what is visible as an element of a situation, over which visible elements belong to what is common, over the capacity of subjects to designate this common and argue for it" (2004: 6). 'Empty signifiers' are the vital battleground for the consolidation of hegemonic visions. As Žižek states, "the struggle for ideologico-political hegemony is thus always the struggle for appropriation of the terms that are 'spontaneously' experienced as apolitical, as transcending political boundaries" (1999: 208).

Discussions on the political relate to discussions on the democratic, where the anti-democratic project is always that which seeks to de-politicize and maintain the functioning of politics in its 'normal' state (ibid.), as opposed to a properly democratic intervention of an 'active' politics of positive citizenship, where groups and organizations develop collective identities, and formulate demands based on such identities. Crouch (2004: 4) identifies the condition of 'post-democracy' where "the mass of citizens plays a passive, acquiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given to them behind the spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by an interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests".

It is the containment of discussion on sustainability on those solutions which are 'possible' which evacuates the occurrence of truly political gestures within the environmental debate. Within the discursive arena of the current framing of 'sustainable development', political imaginaries and questions focussed on the qualitative features of the world in which we wish to inhabit, and the social, environmental and economic

relations we seek to maintain or abandon, is replaced by a 'consensus' around the 'solutions' to environmental problems, which ultimately cannot challenge the underlying 'accepted' features of the neoliberal vision of sustainable development. In that sense there is a certain degree of neoliberal inevitability in terms of the nuclear option, because it is a 'technological megafix' which can enable the continuation of the excesses of late capitalism, in an apparently 'green' fashion (Porrit, quoted in Vidal, 2008). Those politicians who argue that there is 'no option' but to go nuclear are on one level correct, if viewed from the perspective of those 'solutions' which are part of the 'art of the possible'.

Within discourses of 'sustainability', which direct both the consultation process on nuclear power, and the justification for more 'streamlined' planning procedures, the portrayal of unquestionable 'common conditions' are key to framing the terms of the discussion. The two 'common conditions' encapsulated in the government's vision of sustainability in the white paper *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, if we recall, are 'climate change' and 'globalization'. The ways in which the two common conditions are rhetorically deployed within sustainable policy are notably similar however. What they share is being posited and represented as 'external', as objective realities and common conditions of 'civilization' which must be adapted to in an increasingly rapid manner, to avoid disaster.

Both 'external' elements which inform the sustainable vision function similarly. On the one hand, a range of complex and partial economic processes are bundled together within the singular spectre of 'globalization', and the complexities of climatic change are represented and portrayed as the 'inconvenient' presence of CO₂ and little else. Crucially, although part of the same challenge of sustainable development, an actual link between the two is not established, in the sense that there is no suggestion that the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere is inherently linked to the 'economic reality' of globalization.

Such a framing represents what Swyngedouw refers to as a "homogenizing mantle of populist

environmental discourse” which “...combines apocalyptic visions with a hegemonic neoliberal view of social ordering” (2007: 36). The attitudinal approach towards the CO₂ question thus has a certain affinity with populist politics (ibid.). Fundamentally, populism formulates the idea of a threat to the category of ‘the people’ rather than various competing political categories. “The people” Žižek argues “...enters as a political subject, and all different and particular struggles and antagonisms appear as parts of a global antagonistic struggle between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (2006: 553). Such a political constellation, focussing on the mitigation and adaption to various external threats, according to Žižek, “...remains a version of the politics of fear – it mobilizes the crowd by way of invoking the fear of the corrupt intruder” (2008: 302). The idea of ‘reluctant acceptance’ of the nuclear option when it is framed with climate change clearly relates to such a politics of fear, which forces the acceptance of a suspension of discussion or certain legitimate claims because of the fear of an imminent disaster if no action is taken immediately.

The managerial style surrounding ‘sustainability’, reflects the wider trends of the ‘post-democratic’ where the role of government and politics in general, becomes the strategic alliance of an elite mix of business and government to administer the various identified ‘common conditions’ affecting society. Such a managerial form is an example of a political condition where, as Rancière (2004: 7) writes, “consensus, is actually the modern form of reducing politics to the police”. Such a consensual arrangement, sees a form of policy making “...in which the stakeholders (i.e. those with recognized speech) are known in advance and where disruption or dissent is reduced to debates over the institutional modalities of governing, the accountancy calculus of risk, and the technologies of expert administration or management” (Swyngedouw, 2009: 609). Developments such as National Policy Statements and the IPC outlined in *The Planning Act* (2008) represent such managerial tendencies justified through a ‘consensus’ on the ‘solutions’ for combating climate change, of which nuclear is one.

Within the consultation process on nuclear and the ‘participatory’ element of the planning procedures, it would seem that the decisive moment has already occurred. The consultative procedures are merely a method of justifying the inevitability of the business and growth oriented style of politics experienced in recent times. Within such a post-democratic climate, a negative activism of blame and complaint is the order of the day, where the main driving force of action is to hold politicians to account. The foreclosed decision on the nuclear option, it is said, leaves NGO groups the choice between a legal challenge and direct action (Ellis, 2008). One can only answer a question which has been asked: unfortunately, questioning how to alter and transform socio-environmental relations into fundamentally more egalitarian and ecologically just ones is strictly prohibited. Under such prohibition, regardless of consultation, public opinion, and potential risks, nuclear power appears to be an ‘inevitable’ choice.

At the time of writing, the 2010 UK general election has produced a coalition between the conservatives and the liberal democrats. The conservative government originally positioned themselves against the IPC, and the Liberal Democrats were sceptical about the nuclear option. It is yet to be seen exactly how the ‘nuclear renaissance’ will be affected. It is likely however, that given the requirements of nuclear development for strong state support and reduction of public consultation, the authoritarian gestures demonstrated between 2006 and 2010 in the new labour era are set to continue, albeit in a rebranded form. The tactical manoeuvrings of the consultation period, and the developments of *The Planning Act* (2008), point towards the emergent trend of a vision of ‘sustainability’, which excludes alternative trajectories and limits democratic engagement. There is little evidence to suggest that ‘sustainable’ nuclear power can be developed in any other way, regardless of a change in government.

Conclusion

Slavoj Žižek writes in relation to the ‘third way’ consensual politics emergent in the past decade that “...advocates of New Labour like to emphasize that one should take good ideas without any prejudice and apply them, whatever their (ideological) origins. And what are these ‘good ideas’? The answer is of course, ideas that work” (1999: 236) Nuclear power appears to be such an ‘idea that works’ within the consensual vision of sustainable development, where evidence suggests that the decision had largely already been taken, and ‘the fullest consultation’ was a limiting exercise to justify such a decision. The rhetorical framing of nuclear, justifies new planning procedures to offer greater ‘comfort’ to nuclear investors by eradicating the democratic input of the public, all in the name of the non-negotiable, all-encompassing vision of sustainable development. Both developments appear as crucial ‘techniques and functionings’ where politics proper in its active and antagonistic form is replaced by the maintenance of a ‘sustainable vision’, where democracy and politics remain on the back-foot due to the imminence of the ‘common conditions’ of climate change and the global economic reality.

The lenses of the democratic and the political, open up the opportunity for a fundamentally more radical appraisal of environmental politics, which is not based on teasing out how democracy and politics can look like within our ‘current condition’, but rather how our current condition should be viewed from the perspective of the democratic and the political. This fundamental shift of analysis radically reasserts a political imaginary into the de-politicized sphere of sustainable development. Thinking more positively about the discontent experienced during the nuclear renaissance, the potential radicalization of moderate NGOs (see Ellis, 2008) at least could make visible that which a consensual vision seeks to hide. These ‘side effects’ experienced during the policy of the nuclear renaissance reveal the tension between the hegemonic encapsulation of sustainable development and notions of democracy. The appearance of such side effects then raises another critical question: whether

the ‘consensus’ on sustainability is also a sustainable consensus.

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